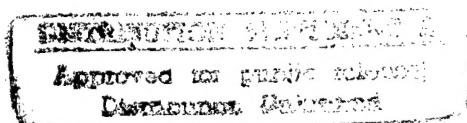


NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.

## FLEXIBILITY: AN ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLE OF WAR

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Joint Military Operations Department.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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## **Abstract of**

### **FLEXIBILITY: An Essential Principle of War**

The Principles of War in current joint doctrine have remained virtually unchanged since the Army first published them in 1921. History demonstrates that the great combat leaders have intuitively applied the unwritten principle of flexibility. Commanders that maintained flexibility were usually successful and those that were inflexible, or rigid, tended to fail.

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century with its attendant information age, and a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), it is imperative that we incorporate the principle of flexibility into the existing Principles of War. The danger of using technological advantages gained through this RMA as a panacea or “silver bullet” to warfighting warrants the inclusion of flexibility as a Principle of War. With the addition of flexibility we can better meet the myriad of changes in doctrine and operational taskings that are likely to result from the RMA.

This paper establishes a “litmus test” for inclusion as a Principle of War. It demonstrates that flexibility is a universally accepted, relevant aspect of warfare that applies across the entire spectrum range of military operations. This argument demonstrates that flexibility is an essential Principle of War.

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*“No rule of war is so absolute as to allow no exceptions.”<sup>1</sup>*

Napoleon Bonaparte  
*Maxims, XLII, 1831*

## **Introduction**

As Napoleon pointed out, a rigid plan or way of thinking does not accommodate exceptions or changes to doctrine. The Principles of War in current joint doctrine have remained virtually unchanged since the Army first published them in 1921<sup>2</sup>. In 1949 the Army re-evaluated and adjusted ‘the principle of cooperation’ to ‘unity of command’. Since then, however, the principles of war have remained the same. Even though the current principles have stood the test of time, history demonstrates that the great combat leaders intuitively applied the unwritten principle of flexibility. Commanders that maintained flexibility were usually successful and those that were inflexible, or rigid, tended to fail.

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with its attendant information age, and a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), it is imperative that we incorporate the principle of flexibility into the existing Principles of War.<sup>3</sup> There is a danger of using technological advantages gained through this RMA as a panacea or “silver bullet” to warfighting. With the addition of flexibility as a Principle of War we can better meet the myriad of changes in doctrine and operational taskings that are likely to result from the RMA.

## **Definition**

In order to more closely analyze the merits for including the principle of flexibility we must define it and its relationship to warfare. Webster's defines flexibility as, "responsive to change, adaptable".<sup>4</sup> Clausewitz defines the nature of war as "the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty".<sup>5</sup> He also says that "everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable...".<sup>6</sup>

During the Cold War, we were ready to fight a European based conventional war. Today, conditions are less certain and the threats are more ambiguous, unpredictable, and more likely to translate into acts of force to achieve political or economic objectives. Uncertainty will be the norm as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Military flexibility therefore, is the ability to take action to change or adapt planning and execution to alleviate the inherent uncertainty, friction and fog of war. With that said, and for the purpose of this analysis, *flexibility* is defined as the requirement to "maintain freedom of action through adaptation".

## **"Litmus Test"**

To further examine flexibility and its relationship to the Principles of War we must first define a principle of war and establish a "litmus test" for membership. JCS Pub 3-0 defines Principles of War as:

“...the best efforts of military thinkers to identify those aspects of warfare that are universally true and relevant. The principles of war currently adopted by the Armed Forces of the United States are objective, offensive, mass, economy of force, maneuver, unity of command, security, surprise, and simplicity. These principles deserve careful study by all who practice the military art, because the insights suggested by their analysis span the entire range of military operations.”<sup>7</sup>

Based upon the joint definition flexibility would meet the criteria for a Principle of War if it is an aspect of warfare that is universally true, relevant and spans the entire range of military operations. Using this “litmus test” will show that flexibility is, in fact, a Principle of War.

All of the armed services identify flexibility as key to operations and have incorporated it into their doctrine. This implies that flexibility meets the first of our identified criteria in the “litmus test”, that it is universally true.

Air Force Manual 1-1 identifies seven tenets of aerospace power to include flexibility and versatility:

“The unique flexibility and versatility of aerospace power should be full (sic) used and not compromised. The ability to concentrate force anywhere and attack any facet of the enemy’s power is the outstanding strength of aerospace power.”<sup>8</sup>

Marine Corps doctrine also identifies flexibility, while using the Clausewitzian model of uncertainty, as key to their operations:

“We must learn to fight in an environment of uncertainty, which we can do by developing simple, *flexible* plans: planning for contingencies; developing standing operating procedures; and fostering initiative among subordinates... success depends in large part on the ability to adapt to a constantly changing situation”<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, General Krulak, the current Commandant of the Marine Corps identifies flexibility as a principle of “Operational Maneuver from the Sea”.<sup>10</sup>

Naval doctrine has historically lagged behind those of the other services, however, current Naval doctrine published in “...from the Sea” in 1992 is consistent with Marine Corps doctrine and emphasizes the expeditionary role. Naval forces are much like those of the Air Force in that they are inherently flexible.

Two of the tenets of Army operations are agility and versatility. A synergistic argument can be made that agility x versatility = flexibility. The Army defines agility as, “the ability of friendly forces to react faster than the enemy..”<sup>11</sup> The tenet of agility focuses on maintaining the initiative and freedom of action. Versatility is defined as the “ability... to meet diverse mission requirements”.<sup>12</sup> A force is flexible if it maintains freedom of action while meeting diverse mission requirements.

These “shared concepts” amongst all the services show the concept of flexibility to be universally true.

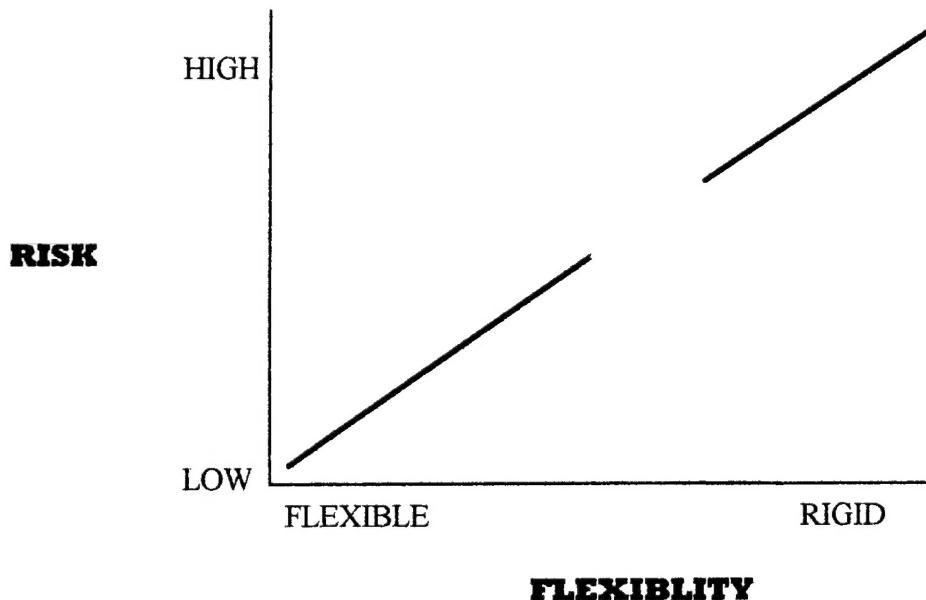
## **Relevance**

Commanders have historically and intuitively built flexibility into their plans through a number of methods to include centralized planning and decentralized execution, task organizing to specific situations, using branches and sequels, through the use of a reserve and by having battlespace awareness. Decentralized execution shifts the authority to the lowest practical level. Thus, allowing subordinates to take the initiative in order to achieve the objectives. Task organizing enables the commander to tailor the force to the situation and adapt to change as necessary. Joint Pub 3-0 says:

“Commanders build *flexibility* into their plans to preserve freedom of action... branches add *flexibility* to plans by anticipating situations that could alter the basic plan. Such situations could be a result of enemy action, availability of friendly capabilities or resources, or even a change in the weather or season within the operational area”<sup>13</sup>

A reserve force enables commanders to adapt to changing battlefield situations. His use of the reserve to seize the initiative and maintain freedom of action is accomplished by having battlespace awareness.

The opposite of flexibility is rigidity. History is replete with examples of successful commanders with flexible plans. There are also many examples of rigid plans that resulted in defeat or near defeat. This is not to imply that rigid plans have no chance for success, however it does indicate that the more rigid the plan, the higher the risk of failure. This can be graphically depicted as follows:



**Figure 1**

As this graph depicts, the higher the flexibility, the lower the risk. Conversely, the more rigid the plan is, the greater the risk of failure. The commander's challenge is to minimize

risk while optimizing flexibility. The green line indicated on the chart is the ideal, the yellow area indicates possible failure and the red area is assuming great risk with a very high probability of failure.

In the Battle of Leyte Gulf in the Pacific in October 1944 the Japanese naval commander, Admiral Soemu Toyoda, developed an operational scheme that relied completely on a deception plan and use of all of his naval assets for success. The plan was meant to draw the United States naval forces north of the Philippines in an attempt to destroy what was portrayed as the entire Japanese Navy. This plan called for the U.S. naval forces to uncover the beach landing sites at Leyte seeking to destroy the Japanese Navy which would then allow the Japanese to disrupt the landing by the Marines. Only Admiral Halsey and the U.S. 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet took the bait, leaving the beach landing covered by the U.S. 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet, resulting in an abysmal failure for the Japanese. Admiral Toyoda had a very rigid plan and was in the “red” graphically (see figure 2).

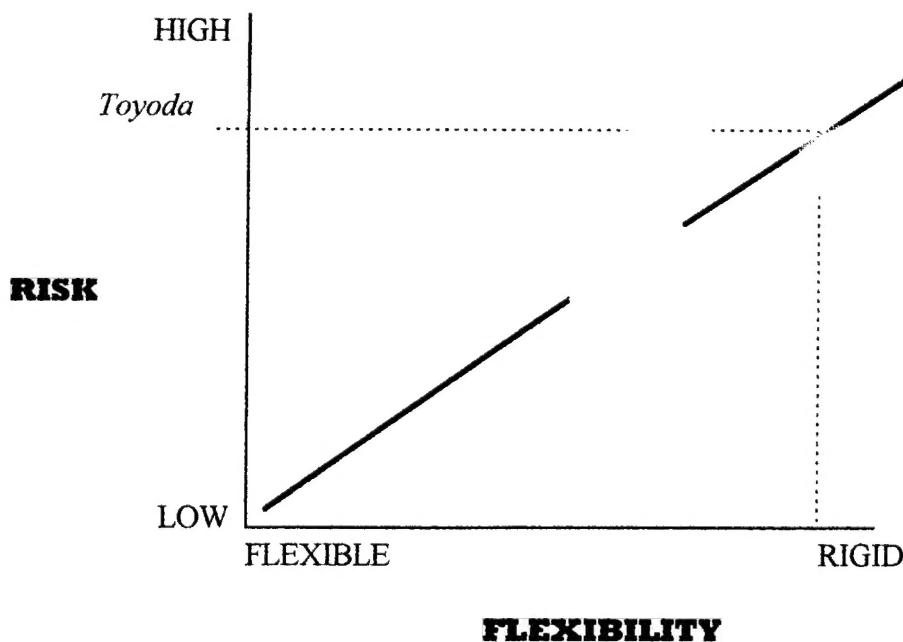


Figure 2

During the Korean War, General Douglas MacArthur's amphibious landings at Inchon in September 1950 were initially very successful enabling him to capture Seoul while destroying the North Korean Army in South Korea. His subsequent advance well into North Korea was thwarted with the intervention of the Communist Chinese. This intervention, while American forces were at the Chosin Reservoir resulted in a withdrawal to a stabilized front just south of Seoul and the extension of the war by an additional two years. His plan can be considered somewhat rigid in that he did not plan a branch for the intervention of the Chinese. While initially successful, his risk factor was in the "yellow" and the subsequent Chinese intervention resulted in a failure (see figure 3).

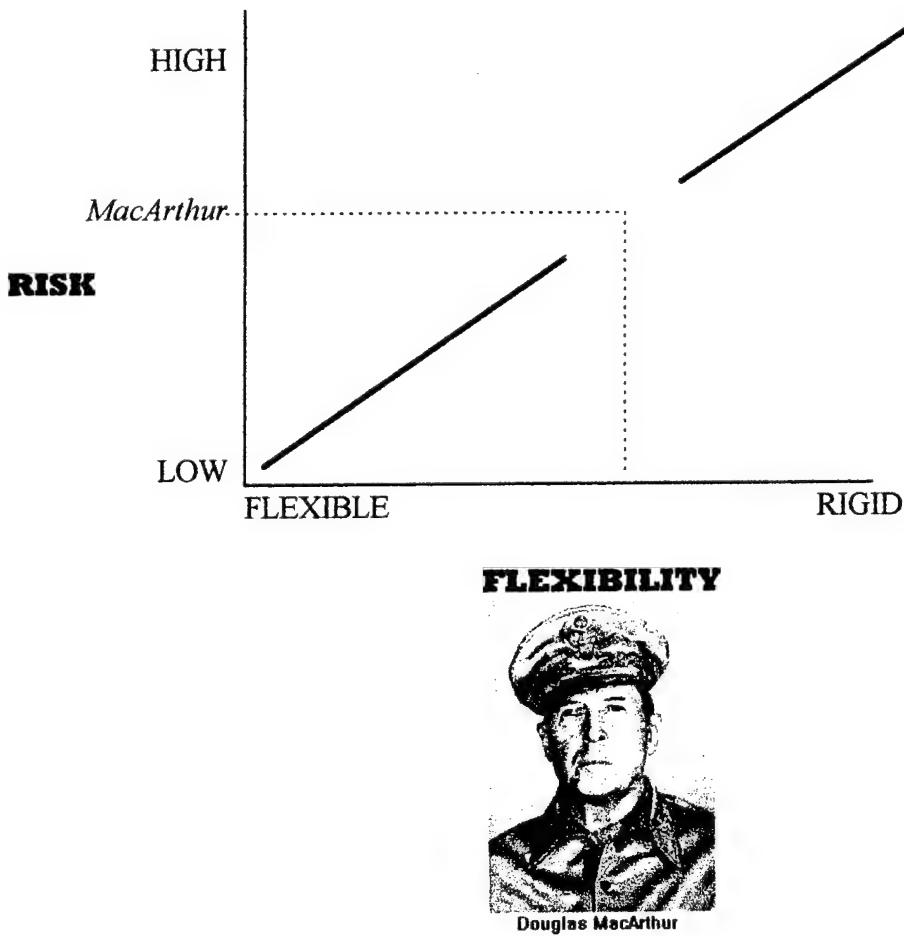
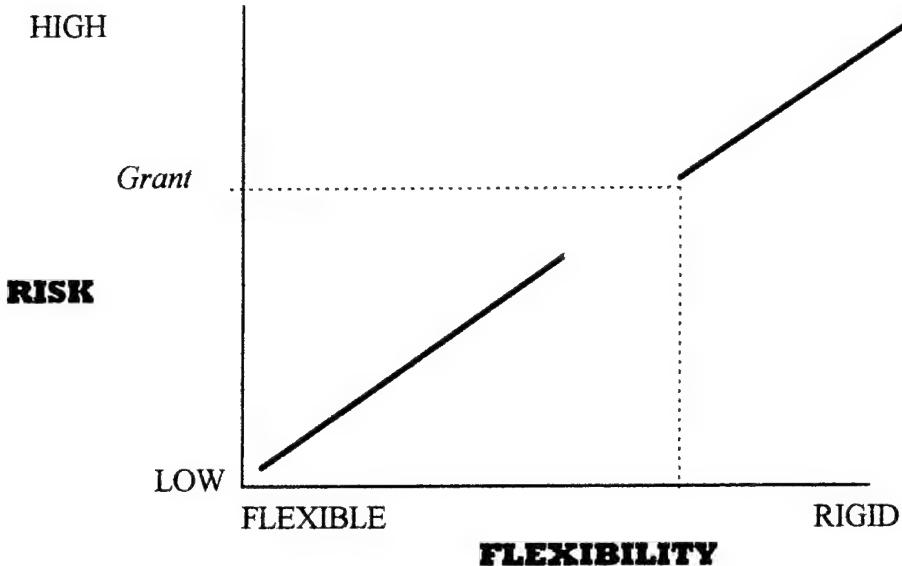


Figure 3

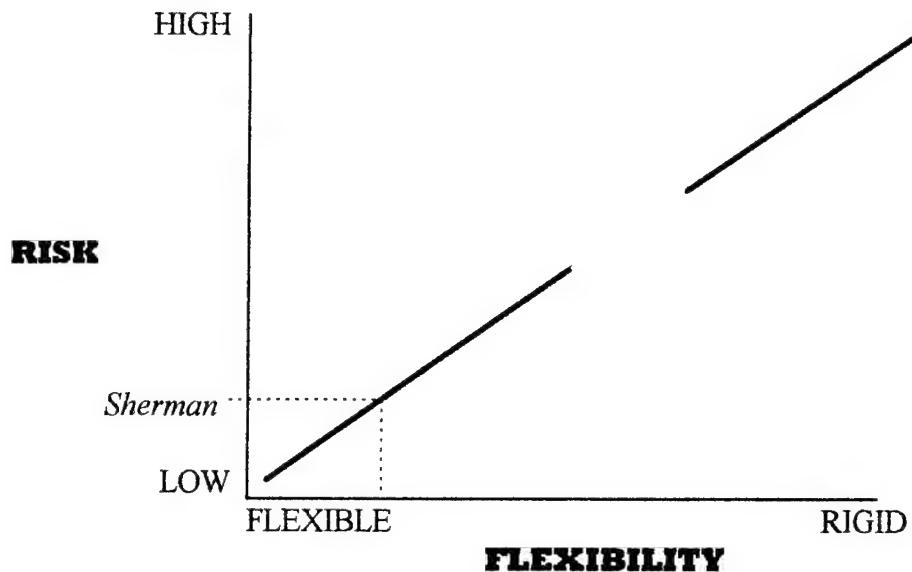
During the Vicksburg Campaign in April 1863, General Ulysses S. Grant developed a bold plan to march his army down the west bank of the Mississippi River to a point below Vicksburg while sending the naval fleet straight past batteries on the bluffs in Vicksburg to rendezvous with troops down river. There they could envelop the town of Vicksburg from the east. His plan had significant risks. The gunboat fleet could be destroyed and his army would be cut off from its supply lines. Additionally, If the plan failed the fleet would be unable to sail back up river. When his army reached the crossing point at Grand Gulf, Mississippi, they found that the town was defended and crossing the river would be difficult and cause unacceptable casualties. Luckily, an escaped slave showed his army an alternate crossing site at Bruinsburg, Mississippi some seven miles down the river. General Grant was eventually successful with a very rigid plan, but there was an element of luck that helped him succeed. His plan was in the “yellow-red” (see figure 4) which illustrates that not all rigid plans are unsuccessful, however the preponderance of rigid plans are potentially doomed to failure.





**Figure 4**

During his “March to the Sea” in late 1864 General William T. Sherman developed a plan whereby he took a line of advance with multiple objectives to keep the Confederates in doubt. Initially his two objectives were Macon and Augusta. His two objectives then shifted to Augusta and Savannah. These multiple objectives kept the enemy in doubt and while Sherman had his preference for which to take, he was prepared to take the alternate if the situation dictated. The need did not arise and he eventually captured Savannah. His plan of multiple objectives was extremely flexible and is depicted in the “green” with low risk (see figure 5).

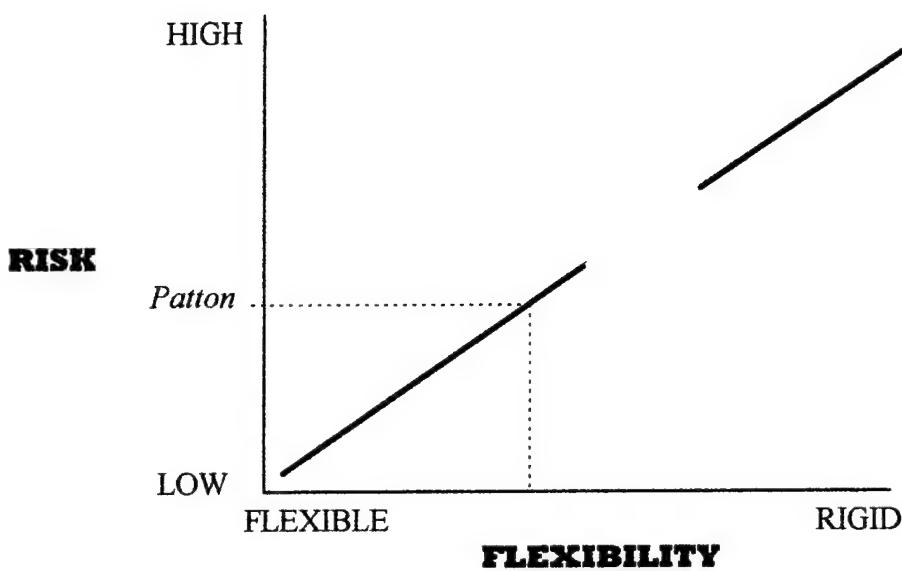


**William Tecumseh Sherman**

**Figure 5**

In December 1944 the Germans launched a counter-offensive through the Ardennes forest with the objective of separating British and American forces and capturing the town of Antwerp. This counter-offensive is now historically known as the Battle of the Bulge. General George S. Patton, Jr. was prepared for the eventuality of the counter-offensive and had prepared defensive plans which gave him the flexibility to react when Bastogne and the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division were besieged. Elements of his Third Army relieved the defenders of Bastogne on December 26<sup>th</sup> after moving 150 miles in 19 hours. Patton's maximum

flexibility of maintaining his own defense while simultaneously relieving Bastogne put him in the “green” which resulted in decreased risk for the overall force, particularly the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (see figure 6).



George S. Patton

Figure 6

## **Current Relevance**

There are two theories for the evolutionary path of warfare and the impact of technology.

The first follows the application of technology to military operations in the industrial, nuclear and information ages. The second theory follows the changing nature of warfare through political, economic, social and scientific revolutions. Based on Heidi and Alvin Toffler's War and Anti-War and Martin Van Creveld's Technology and War

these theories define the nature of warfare in three stages - agrarian (First Wave), Industrial (Second Wave) and information ages (Third Wave).<sup>14</sup> The Principles of War, as written, have remained unchanged since the industrial age (Second Wave). Since we are now entering into the information age, it is time to re-evaluate and add or subtract principles as needed to exist militarily in the Third Wave.

There are four unique characteristics associated with the current RMA:

- extremely precise, stand-off strikes;
- dramatically improved command, control, and intelligence;
- information warfare; and
- nonlethality<sup>15</sup>.

Associated with these characteristics are several dangers presented to warfighting commanders. Principally the danger is on over reliance on technology. The reliance on technology can take flexibility out of planning and execution by causing commanders to rely on "perfect information." Marine Corps doctrine cautions us against this:

"We must guard against overreliance (sic) on technology. Technology can

enhance the ways and means of war by improving man's ability to wage it, but technology cannot and should not attempt to eliminate man from the process of waging war. Better equipment is not the cure for all ills; doctrinal and tactical solutions to combat deficiencies must also be sought. Any advantages gained by technological advancement are only temporary, for man will always find a countermeasure, tactical or itself technological, which will lessen the impact of the technology. Additionally, we must not become so dependent on equipment that we can no longer function effectively when the equipment becomes inoperable".<sup>16</sup>

Supporters of RMA adherence believe that the information revolution will lift the fog of war giving commanders "perfect" battlespace awareness. Battlespace awareness rests on the sensing and reporting technologies associated with intelligence gathering, surveillance and reconnaissance. However, an attempt to collect everything will overload or slow the system. The precise intelligence required to gain this battlespace awareness relies on a "man in the loop" to decide what information is "good" and what information is "bad". Nonetheless, no amount of information technology will eliminate man from the equation.

We also "cannot assume that an overmatch in information technology will directly equate to success on the battlefield".<sup>17</sup> It is possible that the "man in the loop" will select the wrong information to analyze which could have the disastrous effect of causing U.S. forces to attack the wrong objectives or centers of gravity.

The use of precision weapons will also rely on intelligence to destroy the proper military targets. The difficulty is in choosing the correct targets. While attacking enemy centers of gravity we must also protect our own. Centers of gravity in the future could include information systems as a Russian author suggests:

"The proliferation of highly accurate weapons – the so called "smart weapons," whose destructive capability nears that of nuclear weapons – makes... even more relevant to the issue of deterring information assaults on sovereign states."<sup>18</sup>

In his 1996 Thayer Award acceptance speech at the United States Military Academy,

General John W. Vessey, Jr., former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, perhaps said it best:

“...talks of the commander of the future having ‘total battlefield awareness’. Unfortunately, we often speak as if fact as though the knowledge will be available only to *our* commanders. We fail to recognize that computing power is the only commodity in the world whose price continues to go down, and that most of the technological things which go into battlefield awareness are readily available on the commercial market and that ‘great power’ defense expenditures are not needed to acquire that technology. We also sometimes fail to recognize that the opposing commander will be using the same technology to try to make our ‘battlefield awareness’ totally wrong!”<sup>19</sup>

Flexibility in all of our future plans is a necessity. We must plan on defending our information systems and can not place an over reliance on systems for “perfect” information. If our potential adversaries devise a method of defeating our systems through their own technology or change in tactics and doctrine we must adapt to these changes and then respond in order to have our advantages equalized.

A better argument for the relevance of flexibility cannot be made. This is especially important because of the so-called RMA involving extremely precise, stand-off strikes; dramatically improved command, control, and intelligence; and information warfare.

### **Spans Entire Range of Military Operations**

While joint doctrine implies that Principles of War span the entire range of military operations, there are also separate principles established for Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). Since this paper deals only with warfare and not MOOTW, for the purpose

of this analysis, it will be demonstrated that the principle of flexibility spans across all levels of war from tactical to strategic.

At the strategic level we must resist the urge to draw the force down because of advantages gained through technology. Many of our potential adversaries may employ the old Soviet method of overwhelming mass. The two Major Regional Conflict (MRC) strategy currently gives us strategic flexibility and allows us to adapt to an aggressor that takes advantage of U.S. forces being involved in a single MRC. Another source of strategic flexibility includes our ability to rapidly deploy or “power project” forces from the Continental United States to anywhere in the world.

At the operational level the commander must develop plans that are flexible and allow an “out” if the systems do not perform as expected or are defeated by an enemy through destruction or neutralization. This was highlighted in the previous historical examples.

Finally, and arguably most importantly, at the tactical level the best method of maintaining flexibility is through decentralized execution and plans that include branches and sequels. We must guard against using the proliferation of high technology command and control systems as an excuse to centralize tactical execution.

## **Conclusion**

The principle of flexibility is an aspect of warfare that is universally true, relevant and spans the entire range of military operations. It is universally true because all of the armed services currently include it as an important element of their doctrine. Furthermore, several of the services include flexibility as tenets. It is historically relevant as demonstrated through

several examples of operations that either failed or enjoyed success because of flexibility in planning and execution. Commanders that used flexibility in planning and execution were usually successful and those that were rigid in their approach were by and large unsuccessful. Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart put it best:

“History shows that the unswerving pursuit of any one objective is almost certain to be barren of any result. ‘Variability’ of objectives, like elasticity of dispositions, is necessary to fulfill an essential principle of war – flexibility.”<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps most relevant is the impact that the Third Wave warfare has on military operations and the dangers of over reliance on the technologies that it offers. We can not allow a technological advantage to become a “silver bullet” or panacea to warfighting. If we lose our advantage through adversaries gaining the same technology or through tactical and doctrinal changes, will we be able to adapt? The ability to adapt is critical if we are going to be successful.

This paper has also shown that flexibility has an impact across all levels of war from the tactical to strategic level. The impacts have different implications for each level of war, but apply equally.

Based upon this assessment, flexibility should be incorporated into our current list of Principles of War. The principle of flexibility should be included in the next published edition of Joint Pub 3-0 to emphasize the importance of adaptation in planning and executing military operations. If we are going to be successful in Third Wave warfare we must be able to maintain freedom of action – we can and will be successful by using the principle of flexibility.

*"The art of war is, in the last result, the art of keeping one's freedom of action."*<sup>21</sup>

Xenophon  
Athenian soldier and historian  
430 B.C. - 355 B.C.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Fitton, Leadership: Quotations from the Military Tradition, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994) p. 115.

<sup>2</sup> Principles of war were first published in the United States in War Department, Training Regulations no. 10-5, Doctrines, Principles, and Methods, 1921, pp. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Many writers claim a Revolution in Military Affairs. I prefer *evolution* to denote that change is constant and universal.

<sup>4</sup> Webster's New World Dictionary, (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1968) p. 553.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, On War, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) P. 101.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 119.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. A-1.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Air Force. AFM 1-1. Basic Aerospace Doctrine of the United States Air Force. March 1992.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Marine Corps. FMFM 1. Warfighting. 6 March 1989. pp. 6-8.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Marine Corps. "Operational Maneuver From the Sea". Taken from Navy War College instruction document # NWC 3022.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Army. FM100-5. Operations. June 1993. p. 2-7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 2-9.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. JCS Pub 3-0. Doctrine for Joint Operations. 1 February 1995. p. III-20.

<sup>14</sup> Alvin Toffler and Heidi Toffler, War and Anti-War (New York: Little, Brown and Company), pp. 9-10.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Metz and James Kievit, "Strategy And The Revolution In Military Affairs: From Theory To Policy", Monograph, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 27 June 1995.

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<sup>16</sup> U.S. Marine Corps. FMFM 1. Warfighting. 6 March 1989. P. 53.

<sup>17</sup> John F. Stewart (MG, USA), "Command and Control Warfare and the Intelligence on the Future Digital Battlefield". Army Research, Development and Acquisition Bulletin, November-December 1994. p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Sergei A. Modestov, "The Possibilities for Mutual Deterrence: A Russian View", Parameters, U.S. Army War College Quarterly, Volume XXVI, Number 4, Winter 1996-1997. p. 96.

<sup>19</sup> John W. Vessey, Jr. (GEN, USA, retired), "1996 Thayer Award Acceptance Remarks", Assembly, Association of Graduates, United States Military Academy, January/ February 1997. p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Basil H. Liddell Hart, Thoughts on War, (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), p. 246.

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